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Review of *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* by Dylan Robinson (University of Minnesota Press)

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ABSTRACT In his new book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*, Stó:lō music scholar Dylan Robinson contributes to the decolonization of music studies by advocating for a critical awareness of listening positionality. One of the activating forces for this work was the increase in Indigenous participation in classical music since the early 1990s. This resulted in collaborations between non-Western musicians and classical music ensembles in North America that were not necessarily based on reciprocal relationships, instead "fitting" Indigenous artists into paradigms of Western performance and composition. *Hungry Listening* seeks to transform the way we recognize Indigenous sovereignty, perceiving Indigenous oral, aural, and written expressions as sovereign in and of themselves.

KEYWORDS indigenous, music, sound, sovereignty

> *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies.* By Dylan Robinson. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020, 320 pp. (paperback) IBSN 978-1-5179-0769-3 US List: $28.00.

In his new book *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies,* Stó:lō music scholar Dylan Robinson contributes to the decolonization of music studies by advocating for a critical awareness of listening positionality. Robinson derived the title of the book from two words in the Halq'emèylem language: *shxwelítemelh* and *xwlala:m*. The adjective *shxwelítemelh* refers to a white settler's methods or things, derived from the word *xwelítem* (literally "starving person"). This word emerged from the influx of white settlers in the Stó:lō territory during the gold rush of the mid-nineteenth century, as thousands of (mostly) men arrived hungry both for food and the gold they were seeking. The word *xwlala:m* refers to listening and suggests a tactile and embodied sensory orientation particular to *xwélméxw*, a word indicating "the people" in plural form and meaning "Indian" in singular form (267). Robinson contrasts this listening orientation with that of a Western "single-sense engagement" (40) and "a process of the ear rather than the body" (41). Robinson remarks that fluent Halq'emèylem speakers would be unlikely to make this pairing, and with it he intentionally creates an uncomfortable juxtaposition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perceptual orientations.

One of the most powerful parts of the book is in the introduction, wherein Robinson asks any "non-Indigenous, settler, ally, or xwelítem" readers to skip a section called *Writing Indigenous Space* and then rejoin for chapter 1, "Hungry Listening." As a white settler, this

instruction set off disorienting pulls of hunger and resistance to devour words that were not meant for me. This example of Indigenous pedagogy aligns with a kind of resurgent thinking that, building on the work of Audre Lord, Anishinaabe writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes as “not concerned with dismantling the master’s house, that is, which set of theories we use to critique colonialism,” but instead is focused on “how we (re)build our own house, our own houses.”[1] In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson builds this house using the pages of the book.

The first chapter tells the story of a trial, *Delgamuukw v. the Queen* (1985), in which two Indigenous groups, Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en, sought legal authority over their territories in northern British Columbia.[2].” T. Delgamuukw Transcripts. Vancouver: United Reporting Service Ltd. September 19. https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0018292 < https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0018292> .] This trial stands as a case study, opening a discussion of fundamental differences in Indigenous and settler listening practices. Counsel for the Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en plaintiffs asked Chief Mary Johnson to perform a *limx oo’y*, a song of mourning for ancestors, as part of the claim because it holds power as an Indigenous legal order. During this trial, Justice McEachern was unwilling to hear the song as evidence, maintaining that he had a “tin ear” (37). This is an example of a Western listening positionality that refuses to value music as an enactment of sovereignty or a “legal and living document” (45).

The second chapter surveys forms of sensate writing, often known as “performative writing,” in response to calls from Roland Barthes (1977) and Susan Sontag (1966) to reorient the way we think and write about art. This kind of writing foregrounds subject-subject relations between the listener and the music, focusing on the “intersubjective experience between human and nonhuman actors in music performance” (79), as opposed to subject-object relations which regard music as a “passive ‘object’” (79). Robinson extends this in proposing space as a third, agentive subject, considering both the physical spaces where we listen and the modes in which we spatially express experiences of listening, such as within the pages of a book or across a screen. This chapter turns to works by Wayne Koestenbaum, Kevin Kopelson, and Suzanne Cusick as potential models for conveying the intersubjective nature of listening through attention to the form, structure, tone, and affect of writing as a medium. Cusisk’sessay “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight” is one such model, in the way she describes music as a subjective, intimate partner.

The third chapter tracks an increasing number of performances featuring convergences between pre-1750 Western art music and First Nations, Métis, or Inuit traditions between 2001 and 2017. Robinson wonders to what degree we should consider performances like these to be “symbolic expressions of reconciliation” (116). Many Indigenous scholars have been critical of the aims and politics of the idea of “reconciliation,” particularly since Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the Indian Residential Schools was established in 2008. As an example of resistance to musical integration and reconciliation, Robinson offers a piece called “Sarabande” by Mohawk cellist Dawn Avery, which features a solo cello alongside a Buffalo drum and traditional falsetto vocals performed by Mescalero Apache, Yaqui, and Upper Tanana Athabascan musician Steve Alvarez (143). In this piece, the two musical styles intentionally do not integrate and the audience is invited to experience the rub and dissonance of musical alterity.

Chapter 4 focuses on compositional ethics and responsibility by looking at the history of Indigenous song collecting in Canada and the way that Canadian composers have

attempted to repurpose these songs as “aesthetic resources” (154). To offer a model of compositional responsibility, Robinson provides an event score restaging of Alexina Louie’s composition for two Inuit throat singers and a chamber ensemble, *Take the Dog Sled*. Robinson critiques this work, highlighting that, like many Canadian art compositions, it seeks to represent a serene landscape divorced from Indigenous memory, one that erases the history of sled dog slaughter between 1950 and 1975 that greatly impacted Inuit people.

Robinson’s use of performative writing is especially salient in Chapter 5 as he shares his affective reactions to four performances, challenging the assumption that affect is always experienced uniformly across an audience. Robinson describes his tears of anger and weariness at the end of a rock musical, *Beyond Eden,* a fictionalization of the forced removal of twenty-three carved Haida poles. Much of the audience, although also in tears, were not necessarily sharing an affective experience, instead responding to “felt forms of reconciliation” (203). This chapter closes with a brief poem called “Event Score to Act,” that directs settler readers to “give up the over-determination of necessary action” (233). Robinson urges that we must move beyond forms of inclusion that rest on the laurels of empathy and awareness-raising.

In the conclusion of *Hungry Listening*, Robinson creates a space for two settler scholars, Deborah Wong and Ellen Waterman, to begin to process what decolonial listening might involve. Robinson cites David Garneau’s (2016) assertion that Indigenous sovereign spaces must run parallel with spaces for settler allies to “work things out among themselves” (235). Their dialogue is valuable both as a complement to the section of the introduction intended just for Indigenous readers and also as a model for settlers who want to begin dismantling the structures and practices that produce hungry listening. Robinson offers several approaches for resurgent writing about listening experiences in addition to approaches for decolonizing the way that we listen, placing the responsibility on the reader to continue to expand the decolonial and resurgent models that he has presented. While students and scholars of queer, feminist, Black, and Latinx studies may find *Hungry Listening* relevant, those working in Indigenous, performance, and sound studies will find this book most useful to contextualize their work and imagine new approaches.

Notes

1. Simspon, Leanne Betasamosake, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence,* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Press, 2011), 22. ↩
2. British Columbia Supreme Court. 1985. “[Commission Evidence of Marth Brown Vol. 2 ↩

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Hannah Standiford is a PhD student in the Ethnomusicology program at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research is focused on a style of Indonesian music called kroncong and the way it intersects with national identity and nostalgia.

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